

Background article: Practices, Festivals and commemorations

'Id al-Ghadir: the Festival of the Designation of Imam Ali

'Id al-Ghadir takes its name from an oasis not far from Makka, on the road back to Madina. According to Shi'a understanding, this festival marks the occasion on which Prophet Muhammad, speaking in the name of God, infallibly designated or named his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his successor to head the community after his death. It is thus one of the most important festivals of the year for the Shi'a communities. Other Muslims do not commemorate this event and hold that it is founded on a misinterpretation of what took place.

The events behind the festival

About three months before the death of Muhammad, he led the Muslim community on the only Hajj pilgrimage that he performed. By this time, almost all the Qur'an had been revealed and the Muslim practice of the community was well established. All the practices and teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet had been conveyed to the community. On the way back from this pilgrimage, on the journey from Makka to Madina, the Angel Gabriel (Jibril) appeared to Muhammad with the command to "convey what has been conveyed to you or else you have done nothing" [Q. 5:67]. What could this definitive command be at this late stage of Muhammad's mission, when the message had been so comprehensively conveyed? Muhammad halted the community at an oasis called Ghadir Khumm. This was the point at which the roads separated and some had already gone on their way; Muhammad called them back. The whole pilgrim body was thus assembled; by tradition some 70,000 to 100,000 Muslims were present. Muhammad mounted a high place so that he could be seen and heard. He called Ali to him and took him by the hand. He raised his hand and said that all those who accepted him, Muhammad, as their master or leader (*maula*) should take Ali as their *maula* after his death.

This was the clear designation by the infallible Prophet that Ali should be his successor. All the Muslims who were present pledged their allegiance to Ali at this time as the Commander of the Faithful (*Amir al-Mu'minin*). On this occasion, the verse of the Qur'an, "this day I have perfected your religion", was revealed [Q. 5:3]. Muhammad then spoke this prayer: "My Lord, be the friend of whoever is Ali's friend, and the enemy of whoever is Ali's enemy; love whoever loves him and hate whoever hates him; help whoever helps him and abandon whoever abandons him, whoever he may be. Let those who are present convey this to those who are absent."

Commemoration today

'Id al-Ghadir, or 'Id Ghadir Khumm, is celebrated every year on 18th Dhu 'l-Hijja, that is six days after the end of the Hajj. It is marked by gatherings, prayers and talks about the events and their centrality for the Shi'a understanding of Islam.